

Schools will maintain relaxed COVID policies for new school year

Mississippi Today
by Julia James

Mississippi education leaders are largely planning to continue using their COVID policies from last school year, but some have dropped protections altogether.

Schools have been required to offer in-person learning as their primary method of instruction since the start of last school year. Local school boards are allowed to develop their own specific policies regarding virtual options, but are required to ensure that students receive direct instruction from a teacher for the same number of minutes

each day that they would in-person. Any other decisions regarding masking, quarantining, sanitation, and vaccination have been made by districts at the local level for the last year.

The new school year begins as COVID-19 cases are rising in Mississippi, with 1,705 positive cases on July 27 compared to 105 at the beginning of May. While high, they have not yet climbed to the levels seen during the delta and omicron waves. The Mississippi State Department of Health recently announced that families can receive eight rapid tests each month through their county health

department.

Policies vary from district to district, but most appear to be relaxing or maintaining relaxed COVID safety protocols for the upcoming school year, which begins for most districts in early August.

Greg Ellis, spokesperson for the Tupelo School District, said the district is generally continuing to follow its 2021-2022 plan but has added cameras in classrooms so that students who are quarantining due to positivity or exposure can continue to participate remotely in instruction. The district's quarantine policies say they follow CDC and MSDH guidance.

The Greenville School District is also maintaining its 2021-2022 policies, but it requires all students, staff, and visitors to wear

masks, as well as temperature checks and socially distanced seating.

By contrast, the Jackson Public School District has dropped its mask mandate and vaccine mandate for employees but will continue contact tracing and sanitation efforts.

"COVID-19 seems to be another sickness we're just going to have to deal with for the rest of our lives," said Gulfport Superintendent Glen East. He elaborated that the district will require a doctor's note to return to school.

The DeSoto County School District is also mostly returning to pre-pandemic norms, including regarding campus events and school lunch prices. Their plan instructs parents to contact the school nurse for instructions regarding the length of quarantine, and the district clarified that absences due to COVID are still excused.

The Lauderdale Coun-

ty and Vicksburg-Warren School Districts have not made any substantial changes to their plans, which do not require masking and say students should quarantine if they are exhibiting symptoms.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Paul Byers said MSDH will no longer be requiring weekly reporting from schools of positive cases or quarantined students as they "transition to more routine, sustainable surveillance." Generally, the MSDH recommends that masks should be worn when community transmission is high, encourages parents to review Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance, and can provide testing and vaccination support to districts.

Dr. Anita Henderson, president of the Mississippi Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, said that vaccinations are going to be the most effective way of slowing down transmission and encouraged parents to get their children vaccinated, as well as staff to get boosted if they are eligible. Children ages 6 months and older are also now eligible for vaccines, which can be scheduled through MSDH.

She also encouraged families to pick up at-home tests and double-check before at-

tending group events, visiting immunocompromised family, or if they are showing any cold symptoms.

"We are very concerned, just like when school started back last year and we saw that huge surge of delta in the fall," Henderson said. "We're already in the middle of a big omicron surge now, and we're concerned that it's going to also happen in schools. We already know that school teachers are out in our area, we know children who have tested positive have missed their first week of school ... These are things that are going to continue to happen unless we do everything we can to slow down transmission in schools."

Mississippi Today intern Allison Santa-Cruz contributed to this reporting.



Hyde-Smith backs bill to end illegal immigrant abuse of asylum system

Asylum Accountability Measure Exchanges 10-year Penalty, with Permanent Ban

WASHINGTON, D.C. — U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.) this week cosponsored legislation that would permanently bar illegal immigrants who fail to appear in immigration court from benefitting from the Immigration and Nationality Act, the law that governs immigration and citizenship in the United States.

The Asylum Accountability Act (S.4636) would significantly sharpen the penalty for illegal immigrants who enter the country illegally with a belief they can apply for asylum, abscond from their court hearings, and live consequence free in the United States. U.S. Senator Thom Tillis authored the measure.

"The virtual free-for-all at the border is the result of Biden administration policies that give the world the impression that our borders are wide open. Many illegal border crossers have learned to game the asylum process, which makes a mockery of the legal immigration system," Hyde-Smith said. "Senator Tillis' legislation would begin to restore order by making sure there are serious consequences for abusing the asylum process."

"Illegal immigrants are abusing current asylum law, living in the country for years before having to appear in immigration court, and then failing to show up," said Tillis. "The Biden administration's failed policies have caused the unprecedented crisis at the southern border, and it's only getting worse. This legislation cracks down

on any illegal immigrant who tries to skirt the law and implements a commonsense bar on obtaining benefits for anyone who fails to show up for their court hearing. This policy is long overdue and it is time we regain control of our border."

S.4636 was introduced in response to illegal immigrants who take advantage of the asylum system by making an asylum claim then running out the clock and never showing up for their immigration court hearing. These cases have increased as a result of the Biden administration's failure to secure the border and action to limit interior enforcement of the nation's laws.

The permanent ban would strengthen the Immigration and Nationality Law, which currently makes an illegal immigrant who fails to appear for their immigration court hearing deportable and banned from entering the United States for 10 years.

Fueled by the Biden administration's failed catch and release policies, the current wait time for an asylum case to be completed is 4½ years. There are over 667,000 asylum seekers in the backlog, meaning potentially tens of thousands of illegal immigrants will continue to break the law and disappear into our communities.

According to a recent Government Accountability Office study, 9 percent of all illegal immigrants enrolled in Alternatives to Detention ultimately absconded.

U.S. Senators Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.), Bill Haggerty (R-Tenn.), and Ted Cruz (R-Texas) are also original cosponsors of the Asylum Accountability Act.



Living With Children

By John Rosemond
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Q: Our soon to be 5-year-old son enjoys playing with his 14-month-old brother, but there have been three times recently when the baby has started crying and when I check, big brother has a guilty look on his face. So far, the baby has suffered a scratch under one eye, a red mark on his face where a ball hit him, and a bruised forehead from falling over. When big brother is banished to his room for these incidents, he is more upset about being punished than about hurting his brother. His lack of remorse bothers us. As a result, we've put baby brother off limits for a time. Are we expecting too much?

A: I think you may be jumping to unwarranted conclusions.

Let's face it, folks, when a 5-year-old boy and a 14-month-old boy interact on a daily basis, the younger one is bound to experience occasional pain. This is the almost inevitable consequence of having two boys, and you are going to go slowly insane if you assign yourself to the impossible task of preventing this from happening. For at least the next three to four years, until the physical disparity begins to level out, the younger one will experience more play-related insult than the older one. In and of itself, this isn't bad. It's just the way it is. Boy play tends to be rough at times. Furthermore, the fact that big brother even wants to play with a 14-month-old is a good sign, an early indication of a growing relationship. Count your lucky stars that signs do not point to early resentment on the part of your first-born.

Furthermore, you may be misinterpreting big brother's reaction to being punished for these incidents. You think he lacks remorse. I think he's justifiably upset at having been punished for something he didn't intend to do.

For example, if I'm trying to stay within the speed limit, but I fail to see a "Reduce Speed Ahead" sign and I'm ticketed for speeding, I'm not going to be remorseful. I'm going to be upset (albeit careful not to let the officer know). After all, it was not my intention to speed. On the other hand, if I'm intentionally speeding, trying to shave time off a trip, and I'm pulled over, I'm going to accept the ticket, apologize to the officer, and be a better citizen in the future. I have a strong feeling that your older son is being "ticketed" for unintentionally exceeding his younger brother's "speed limit." Under the circumstances, I'd fully expect him to be more upset than remorseful. He's being punished for being, at worst, clumsy.

When incidents of this sort happen, you should take the opportunity to help big brother understand the baby's limits. For example: "I know you want to teach your brother to play catch, but you can't teach a baby to catch by throwing things at him." Then, help him learn ways of playing that won't involve risk of pain to the baby, as in, "Roll the ball instead of throwing it." You also need to praise him for his attempts to be such a good big brother, however awkward they may be at times.

John Rosemond: johnrosemond.com, parentguru.com.

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